

Jacob Pierce, GA – 2015

For weeks, I have struggled to articulate how incredible of an experience Washington Week was for me. My weeklong excursion in D.C. introduced me to people all over the country, provided me with an experience to see the federal government up close, and hear from the men and women who serve in the nation's federal bureaucracy. The speakers during Washington Week reminded me why public service is important, which only served to strengthen my resolve to get involved in the public sector.

One of the first speakers we heard from was the Senate Parliamentarian, Elizabeth MacDonough. Prior to USSYP, I was unaware that such a position even existed, but I soon learned that her position was a valuable one, as she is tasked with interpreting the laws of the United States and ensuring that the rights of the minority party in the Senate are upheld. While Ms. MacDonough's job was impressive, what impressed me the most about her was her candid admission that more needs to be done involve people of color in the federal government.

The Democratic Co-Chair of 2015 Senate Youth Program said something to me and my fellow delegates that still resonates with me today, more than a month later, "people don't care how much you know until you show how much you care." These words especially ring true as I reflect on the high school students from across the country that I was given a chance to meet because of this incredible program. Every single delegate there had political opinions (some were stronger than others), but that's not what impressed me about my peers. What impressed me was their commitment to public service and improving the lives of people in not just their local communities, but lives across the country and globe.

One of the most memorable moments of my trip was when we travelled to the White House, where we got a chance to hear from President Obama, a man that I have admired for quite some time. The president shared with us some advice that I think I will never be able to forget: "Don't worry so much about who you want to be, worry more about what you want to do." So many people, both young and old, seem to aspire to achieve certain titles or ranks, which, in the president's view, detracts from the work being done. If we focus more on what we want to do with our lives and do our very best in whatever position we find ourselves in, we'll be able to achieve the grand titles so many aspire for.

Washington Week also helped to underscore a point that Senator Cory Gardner made towards the end of the program: "it's hard to hate up close." It's hard to hate someone that you've spent a night joking at the dinner table with, even if their views on the Affordable Care Act or nuclear negotiations with Iran are different from your own. If members of government, at all levels, took Senator Gardner's words to heart, we would see progress being made on a whole host of issues. If we take the time to listen and spend time with one another, we will learn that, despite their differing opinions, they are people just like us, and listening to what they have to say might allow us to find some common ground. As Senator Gardner also said, "be firm in your principles, but flexible in the details."

My trip to Washington, D.C. showed me that despite all the polls showing that approval ratings of Congress are at an all time low and claims that Washington is a place riddled with dysfunction and partisan gridlock, there are good people in Washington who genuinely are trying to make this country a better place. Above all, Washington Week left me very hopeful about our nation's future; my fellow delegates are some of the most passionate, intelligent, and respectful people I have ever met, and when we make our way into positions within the government, I have no doubt that we will be able to create that more perfect union. I cannot thank the Hearst Foundations, the Military Mentors, the government officials, and my fellow delegates enough for making Washington Week 2015 one of the most incredible, life-changing weeks of my life.